

Alice PUNG

## Prologue

This story does not begin on a boat.

We begin our story in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, in a market swarming with fat pigs and thin people. The fat pigs are hanging from hooks, waiting to be hacked into segments, and the thin people are waiting to buy these segments wrapped in newspaper over a glass counter. When they haggle over the price of trotters, there is much hand-gesticulating and furrowing of eyebrows because the parties do not spick da Ingish velly good. "Like a chicken trying to talk to a duck," my mother calls these conversations. But she is not here today to quack over quality pigs' paws because she is lying in a white hospital room waiting for me to arrive.

So it's just my father, standing smack-bang in the middle of this market, and his shoes are getting wet because of the blood diluted in the water that comes from the huge hoses used to wash away the mess at the end of the day. He looks down at the grates and thinks about pig's blood jelly and whether he'll ever buy it again. He likes the taste, but Ah Ung told him that he worked in the abattoir when he first came here and the carcasses were hung from hooks with buckets beneath to collect the pigs' blood. Because they were not washed properly, they would sometimes leak with piss and other filthy drips. My father does not think back to Phnom Penh, where he would be eating brains in broth made by street vendors stationed across the road from the homeless leper coughing out half a lung in the doorway of some derelict shopfront, but looks up and points at the pink and red appendages behind the glass. With his other hand, he holds up two fingers.

This is the suburb where words like *and*, *at* and *of* are redundant, where full sentences are not necessary. "Two kilo dis. Give me seven dat." If you asked politely, "Would you please be so kind as to give me a half-kilo of the Lady Fingers?" the shop-owner might not understand you. "You wanna dis one? Dis banana? How many you want hah?" To communicate, my father realises, does not merely mean the strumming and humming of vocal cords, but much movement of hands and contortion of face. The loudest pokers always win, and the loudest pokers are usually women. My father's moment is lost when a middle-aged woman with Maggi-noodle curls points at the man behind the counter with a flailing forefinger and almost jabs out an eye as she accuses the other Non-English-Speaking Person of selling her furry trotters. "Why yu gib me dis one? Dis one no good! Hairy here, here and dere! Hairy everywhere! Dat nother one over dere better. Who you save da nother one for hah?" Bang on the counter goes the bag of bloodied body parts, and my father knows that now is the time to scoot away to the stall opposite if he wants hairless ham.

This suburb, Footscray, has possibly the loudest and grottiest market in the Western world, although that term doesn't mean much when you're surrounded by brown faces. Footscray Market is the only market where you can peel and eat a whole mandarin before deciding whether to buy a kilo; where you can poke and prod holes in a mango to check its sweetness. My father does not even bat an eye at the kid who is covering her face with one hand, holding out a wet peeled lychee with the other and wailing "Aaarghhh! My eyeball!" to her little brother. He watches as the baby in the pram starts

howling and the mother pulls off some grapes from a stand to shut him up while she goes on with her poking and prodding and justified pilfering. Parsimonious women aren't going to spend four dollars on sour strawberries simply because they were too stupid to taste-test them first. "Cause you more trouble coming back the second time!" declares my mother. "Ayyah, no good to be tormented by four dollars! Try and avoid it if you can." But there is no way to taste-test these trotters, my father thinks as he looks through the clear plastic bag, so he has to take the word of the shouting woman in the opposite stall. He will bring these trotters home for his sister to boil into a broth, and then he will take the broth to the hospital for his wife.

He steps out onto the footpath, away from the damp smells of the market. This is the suburb of madcap Franco Cozzo and his polished furniture, the suburb that made Russell Crowe rich and famous for shaving his head and beating up ethnic minorities, so it doesn't really matter that these footpaths are not lined with gold but dotted with coruscating black circles where people spat out gum eons ago. "Don't swallow the rubber candy," mothers say to their kids. "Spit it out. Spit it out *now* – that's right, onto the ground there." Ah, this wondrous new country where children are scared of dying because they have swallowed some Spearmint Wrigley's, not because they stepped on a condensed-milk tin filled with ammunition!

So in the beginning it doesn't matter to my father that there may be pee in the pig's blood jelly served in the steaming bowls of *Pho* rice noodles, or that you can't spick da Ingish very well, or that there are certain vegetables you can't get in Tatsing grocery that you could get in Vietnam. No, it doesn't matter at all, because in this suburb he watches grandmas with faces as blunt and brown as earthed potatoes hobble along in their padded jackets. As the wheels of their cloth-covered trolleys roll by, they tell the jabbering children to spit out the gum. My father looks, and smiles, wondering whether his firstborn will be a girl or a boy. He presses the black rubber button on the traffic lights and remembers when they first encountered these ticking poles.

## Part 1

Here they all are, standing carefully on the curb at a road crossing – my grandmother, my father, my mother and my Aunt Que. It is early morning, and their grins are so wide that it seems they all went to bed with clothes-hangers shoved in their mouths to save storage space at the Midway Migrant Hostel.

“Wah! Look at that!” cries my grandmother as they meander down the street draped in their De Paul finery, exclusive new arrivals from the St Vincent line. A polyester peasant blouse covers my mother’s protruding belly with purple pansies, and she has carefully co-ordinated her white low-heeled pumps with pink Adidas pants. Aunt Que sashays around in a brown dress and a fifty-cent jacket that has real fur on the collar and real mothballs in the pockets. She is followed by my father, sauntering in his fine denim bell-bottoms with brown plastic thongs. He is wearing one of those shirts with the wide flapping collars that point like two arrows at the women on either side of him. Woohoo, look here at my stunning sister and my spectacular wife. Finally, my grandmother pads along in a light-blue cotton pyjama suit she has sewn herself. A pair of sunglasses sits on top of her head – a second pair of eyes gazing skywards, beseeching the Lord Buddha to bless St Vincent and his kind fraternity for vesting the family with such finery.

“Wah!” exclaims my grandmother again and points to an old man pressing the squishy black-rubber button. The rest of the gang turn to look.

“The cars stopped for that old one!” my grandmother cries. Tic-tic-tic-tic-tic-tic goes the traffic light, and as the green man flashes, the old man casts a suspicious look at the crew pointing at him before hobbling away quickly to the other side of the road.

“Wah!” exclaims my mother. “Look over there! On the other side! The cars even stopped for those little girls!” Two bored ten-year old girls with flouncy balloon skirts sewn to the elastic waistband of their neon biker-pants walk across the road, dappling the bitumen with pastel dribbles from their melting Peters ice-creams.

My father stands in front of the yellow pole and presses the little rubber button again. “Even Mother can do it! Watch me do it again! But try not to gawk like Guangzhou peasants, please.” My grandmother ignores the comment and looks up at the lights. “We wait for Mao Ze Dong man to disappear before we move,” she instructs. “He stops everything.” She is getting the hang of this. As the little Red Man disappears and the little Green Man reappears, the crew hobble to the other side in beat with the ticking traffic light.

Back where my father came from, cars did not give way to people, people gave way to cars. To have a car in Cambodia you had to be rich. And if you had money, it meant that you could drive at whatever speed you pleased. If the BMW driver driving along the country road accidentally knocked over a peasant farmer, he knew he had better zoom away quick because the whole village might come and attack him with cleavers. The little Green Man was an eternal symbol of government existing to serve and protect. And any country that could have a little green flashing man was benign and wealthy beyond imagining.

Wah, so many things about this new country that are so taken-for-granted! It is a country where no one walks like they have to hide. From the top floor of the Rialto building my parents see that the people below amble in a different manner, and not just because of the heat. No bomb is ever going to fall on top of them. No one pissing in the street, except of course in a few select suburbs. No lepers. No Khmer Rouge-type soldiers dressed like black ants prodding occupants of the Central Business District into making a mass exodus to Wangaratta. Most people here have not even heard about Brother Number One in Socialist Cambodia, and to uninitiated ears his name sounds like an Eastern European stew: "Would you like some Pol Pot? It's made with 100% fresh-ground suffering."

Here there is sweetness, and the refugees staying at the Midway Migrant Hilton horde packets of sugar, jam and honey from the breakfast table. So used to everything being finite, irrevocably gone if one does not grab it fast enough, they are bewildered when new packets appear on the breakfast table the next day. So they fill their pockets with these too, just in case. Weeks later, the packets still appear. The new refugees learn to eat more slowly, that their food will not be taken from them or their bowls kicked away. They learn that here, no one dies of starvation.

So in the beginning there are many wahs of wonder, and when my father returns home swinging his bagful of swine hocks, his ears are assailed with even more. "Wah! Look at this water from the tap!" cries my grandmother, handing him a steaming mug. "So clean and hot you could make coffee with it." When they walk to the Western General Hospital with my mother to get the blood tests done, bitumen roads are a source of wonder. "Wah! So black and sparkling like the night sky! Rolled flat by machines and not by stones pulled by a hundred people!" When they catch the tram to declare Australian citizenship, the orderliness of the streetscape does not escape my father, who has proudly memorised all the names of the roads, and in the process the chronological order of this colonised country's monarchs – "King Street, William Street, Queen Street, Elizabeth Street."

My parents become pioneers navigating a new land. Although they travelled through three Southeast-Asian countries by foot, nothing can prepare them for travelling up and down escalators. "Go down!" they all goad my mother. But she stands firmly at the top, blocking off entry for all other embarkers. She stares down at her husband, her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law, who have already arrived at the bottom. "Ahhh. I'm scaaaared!" My father finally steps on, growing larger and larger as he approaches the top with a smirk pasted on his face, like a slow zoom in a cheesy Chinese film. "Just step between the yellow lines," he instructs. "Come on, you've gone up before, so you can come down too! Weeee, wahhh, see what fun!" Up and down and down and up they ride the escalators at Highpoint Shopping Centre – this 32-year-old man, his eight-months-pregnant wife, his 27-year-old sister and the old Asian grandmother in the purple woollen pyjamas. Every journey is one small step for Australians, but one giant leap for the Wah-sers.

The first time my mother walks into a Sims Supermarket, the first moment she sees people loading the trolleys with such habitual nonchalance, she exclaims a long, drawn-out, open-mouthed "wahhhh" of wonder. She would not have been surprised if the baby popped out then and there. This enormous warehouse would shock the eyeballs out of the most prosperous families in Phnom Penh! So gleaming spick-and-span clean! Such beautiful

food! Such pretty packages! Packed in shelves so high and deep, all the colours so bright and all the lights so white that she does not know where to look. Aunt Que nudges her: "Ay, stop gawking like such a peasant."

"Wah, you mean *anybody* can come into this big food warehouse?" my ma asks in awe.

"Of course." Aunt Que has only been here once before. "See that fat man with his bumline showing through his shorts? See those little children with no socks? Anybody!" Even the local thong-wearing loiterer can load up a trolley with these treasures, without needing to pause and calculate because it is all so cheap.

As my mother wanders and wonders up and down the aisles, she thinks about being the first in her family to see such magic. She thinks about the ones back in Vietnam. She sees her father sleeping on the floor of the monastery, her mother selling *bancao* at the market. Her skin-and-bones sisters beneath the tap outside with soap powder dripping from their hair. She thinks about the ones back home who are unprocessed and waiting to be processed, unlike the meat that is stacked in tins of twelve in front of her.

"Fifty cents!" exclaims my Aunt Que. "Look, Kien!"

"I know," says my mother, "so cheap, eh? Packed so beautifully, too." Back in Cambodia, every canned comestible seemed to have some kind of Lucky This-or-That animal plastered on its label. "Lucky Lion Chilli Sauce." "White Rabbit" candy. "Golden Star Happy Dragon" noodles. My mother looks at my Aunt Que, who is holding a can in her hands and turning it round and round slowly, and she knows that my aunt is thinking of the ones back home too.

"What do you think, Young Aunt?" my mother finally asks. "Should we buy some hah?"

"Yes, let's buy some," determines my Aunt Que. "It's so cheap!"

Back home, in our rented weatherboard house in Footscray, my mother cuts the meat up into little pieces and makes a nice stir-fry stew. "It smells so good," breathes my auntie as she spoons the meal onto a large plate. My mother cannot help but smile with pride. It is only later when my family sees the television commercial that they realise who – or more accurately, what – the meat is for.

Later that evening, in the bed that fills up the entire small storeroom where they sleep, my mother and father lie thinking about their full tummies. "Wah, who would believe that they feed this good meat to dogs? How lucky to be a dog in this country!" My mother puts her hand on her sticking-out stomach and smiles. Good-oh, she thinks. Her baby is going to be born with lots of Good-O in her. Good stuff.

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"The hospital nearly gave your father a heart attack when you were born," my mother tells me later. "Your father was at the Migrant Hostel doing his translating job, trying to explain to those countryside Cambodian migrants that the reason that they were so cold in the mornings was because they were meant to sleep *under* the sheets. Their beds were made so nicely when they first arrived that they thought they were meant to sleep *on top* of the sheets. They were scared of mucking up the carefully tucked blankets. No one wanted to be shuffled back onto the plane.

"Your father was trying to tell them that the beds were made to be slept in, when suddenly he was told that he was needed at the hospital.

Something must have happened to me, your father thought. Why would a hospital *need* him? He thought about bringing along his acupuncture needles just in case, but there was no time. When he arrived at the hospital, he discovered that the doctors just wanted him to be there to see the baby come out!" In Cambodia the husbands would usually find a chair and sit in front of the room where babies were being born until they heard the wahwahwah sounds, and it was only then that they would know that the whole messy business was over and they could find out whether the child had the desired dangly bits or not.

When my mother wakes up, she notices the white walls, the clean room and the pastel curtains. Just like a bedroom, she thinks sleepily, not a trace of blood or sour meat smell. There are green and red cups of hospital jelly in the tray in front of her, and little dixie cups of vanilla ice-cream. She thinks that the hospital is throwing her a post-birth party. I am the most crumple-faced walnut she has ever seen, and I have a clump of black hair plastered to my head like a Beatle circa the early '60s. This is the one thing the nurses will always remember about me: "She came out with *all this hair* like a little hat!" they exclaim. "The first Chinese baby we have ever seen, and with a full head of hair!" I keep crying: having unique headgear obviously does not bring any special consolation. My mother does not know what to do with this little creature with the howling hole in her face; she has been accustomed to me quietly curled up and causing no fuss in her belly, content with whatever liquid morsels passed through her umbilical cord. Now I won't even take my ma's milk. In the end, she feeds me a spoonful of coffee sweetened with condensed milk to shut me up. Only then can she close her eyes and go blissfully back to sleep.

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"Have you thought of a proper name for the baby yet?" my grandmother asks her son. She has nothing but disdain for those parents who do not give their children Chinese names. Did they really think that new names would make the world outside see that yellow Rose was just as radiant a flower as white Daisy?

"I have indeed," says my father. "And not just some common Pretty Pearl or bloody Blooming Orchid name like every second girl!" He holds up a little book with a cover that shows some exceptionally pretty people of all skin tones standing around smiling and patting the heads of catatonic-looking creatures: cattle, lambs and even a lion or two. Written on the cover are the Chinese characters for *Be Ready for the Good News*. Some kind-hearted white folks had given him this free literature guaranteed to put an end to all suffering.

"Good News."

"Good News?" retorts my grandmother.

"Yes, Good News!" claps my father, because this is Paradise, and his baby is born into it.

Next my father has to search for an English name, because his daughter has to have a name that her future legions of white-faced friends will remember, but not a name that she can never grow into. Cousin François is about as French as French fries, French toast and French kiss, while Cousin Candy is more like a piece of congealed toffee stuck at the back of the throat, too gooey to swallow, but too unsightly regurgitated.

Most parents play it safe and stick to the list in the "Naming your Baby" book in the hospital. Yet certain names stand out above the Lin-dahs

and the Day-vids of the world. Across the road is a boy named Ao whose father named him after the first half of the Cantonese word for Australia. At the New Star Grocery is a Chinese boy named Freedom, and a Vietnamese girl named Visa. And of course, Richard, for riches. It doesn't matter that Sky will eventually end up working at the bank, that Mercedes will stay in her parents' factory producing picture frames, or that Liberty will get married at eighteen and raise a family of four by age thirty. It doesn't matter that these children will grow up among other playmates whose parents push them so high that their heads spin from vertigo: Day-vid the heart-surgeon by day and hobby concert violinist by night; and young Lin-dah with the lovely brick-veneer double-storey dwelling and a dental clinic above her parents' jewellery store. It doesn't matter, because at this age we do not know that our playmates Lin-dah who used to be Linh and Day-vid who used to be Duong will be jet-setting to their latest holiday destinations in the future with the money earned from their double-happiness salaries, that they will pay with real Visa cards and drive real Mercedes. All this doesn't matter because at the moment they are the ones with the banal unpronounceable names, and we are the children with the special names. We are the ones smiled upon by grown-ups, white people and Fortune.

My father remembers a story translated from English that he read in his youth, about an enchanted land in which a little girl finds herself. This new daughter of his will grow up in this Wonder Land and take for granted things like security, abundance, democracy and the little green man on the traffic lights. She will grow up not ever knowing what it is like to starve. She will go to the Great School, and study to be anything she desires. Then after University, of course she will become a lawyer and marry Day-vid the heart surgeon. "This girl is going to have a good life," says my grandmother. "Look at her now, refusing to eat her congee! Now what child under Pol Pot could have the luxury of refusing food, especially when her mother has carefully sucked the heat out of it in her own mouth first. Ay, this girl is going to have a good life indeed!"

For Wahsers like us, there is no such thing as tacky cheap knick-knacks. What an insult to call kitsch all the familiar stuff from the old country, the stuff even wealthy people had in their homes. Baskets for two dollars, colourful pink and red ones, in which to wash the lettuce. Plastic neon-yellow chopstick-holding baskets, plastic racks, plastic bedside tables for thirty dollars each to be assembled at home. Bright prints of Vietnam scenery on shaped plastic to hang on the walls of your house. Colourful floor mats with little animals printed on them. And squeaking sandals for the children, sandals at every corner of the house, so guests do not need to walk around in bare feet. My father brings home twelve pairs of oversized brown plastic sandals that are on sale at a little gift shop in Footscray, where they also sell embroidered slippers for \$3.50. Other incense-ridden places in the city or Carlton would sell them for \$25.95, under the name of exotic oriental ware.

We are wealthy beyond measure, my father keeps reminding us; not even the wealthy families in Phnom Penh live like this. Some of the furniture given to us by the Brotherhood is better than the furniture for sale in Cambodia. "Ah, look at this house," he laughs as he stands in the front yard of our first home in Braybrook. "It's beautiful! Ah, look at these shoes! I brought them in the largest size possible so they can fit anybody!"

"Not the Aussies," corrects my mother. "Their feet are one and a half times that size!"

"Doesn't matter about the Aussies, they never take off their shoes anyhow."

"Heh heh," laughs my mother, as she stacks my father's brown plastic shoes on a white plastic shoe rack, "a good thing too. Big feet smell." It is her first house, too, a whole house of her own. Except for the mother-in-law as an unfortunate permanent fixture, it is exactly as my father had promised. My mother buys little glass figurines from the Teochew gift shops that are sprouting up in every street, their racks over-brimming with toilet paper next to plastic flowers next to dog-food dishes next to garish plastic pictures of Jesus Christ with a raised red heart emanating from his chest and rays of fluorescent light reaching to every corner of the frame. "Look at this, Agheare." My mother shows me a small white plastic wheelbarrow with fake flowers spilling out from the centre. She places it behind our glass cabinet in the front room of the house for guests to notice. "Beautiful hah?" I agree wholeheartedly. It fits right in with our blue and maroon vase from Uncle Fang's Guangzhou glass factory, and a little white porcelain angel with her features painted too high for the grooves on her face. Beautiful things do not need to be expensive, and precious things are to be kept hidden in case of burglars, or guests with kleptomaniac fingers. My parents could never understand those houses where the Royal Doulton plates and family antiques were displayed for every eye to see. After war, people learn to keep good things hidden. They learn that nothing is permanent, and that the most beautiful things are not necessarily the most expensive.

Grandmother is a collector of string, of Danish biscuit tins, of scraps of paper, and artwork from me. When I come home from kindergarten with bits of macaroni stuck onto a paper plate and spray-painted gold, my grandmother, my auntie and my mother wah over it. How magnificent, they breathe, how precious. No muted tones for us, we like our things two-thousand-decibel colourful. The brighter, the better. At Christmas, when my brother Alexander and I are colouring white paper with crayons to make paper chains because we don't have any pre-printed coloured paper, my grandmother cries, "You

silly kids. You don't have to do that, look what I have!" She holds up a handful of junk-mail advertisements. "Look at all the colour here!" She sits on the floor with us, helping us cut up Target advertisements into strips. We make paper chains and string them from every corner of the ceiling, hang them from every doorframe. "Isn't this much better than white paper?"

White is the colour of mourning, red is the colour of blood and life and sunrise, and black is the colour of the evening. But summer evenings here seem pastel, the weather more tame than in Southeast Asia. In fact, everything about this new country seems more contained, hazy like a sort of heaven, no streaks of red or orange or yellow to assail the eye or unsettle the senses.

In the evenings, the windows are open and we go outside and sit in the trailer Dad bought home from the Alcan factory. It is good in the trailer, we make it bang here and there in the wilderness of our front yard, beneath the tall red-purple plum tree. This tree overshadows all the other trees, stretching its branches like extended arms covering the whole front yard and half the verandah, and in between are the smaller trees, the bushes, the ferns clamouring for the light. Red leaves cover the ground of the front yard, and the whole place is like a rainforest without rain. You cannot tell that this is a Chinese house. No hexagonal I Ching mirror on the front door, no words of warning, no clipped hedge and double happiness signs anywhere, unless you count the name of our street. No neat little cumquat trees at the front for luck.

We are trying to assimilate, to not stand out from the neighbours, to not bring shame to our whole race by carrying over certain habits from the old country, such as growing chickens in the backyard or keeping goats as pets. The plants we plant in the backyard are functional plants, herbs like hot Thai mint, basil, shallots and lemongrass, and we have geraniums and oleander in the front yard.

In fact, if you watch from the outside, you will see the crinkle-faced Asian grandmother watering the bird-of-paradise flowers with the hose. Through the back window of the house you will see the mother washing the dishes in the kitchen, and in the front yard you can watch the two children with half-coconut-shell haircuts poking holes in the dirt and trying to plant black custard-apple seeds, and everything seems so true-blue suburban that you will never suspect that the inside of the house is crowded with such a collection of curiosities that make us smile, make my father clap his hands in delight as he peers up at the smiling faces of Ordinary Australians cut up from the Target brochures and strung up in sticky-taped chains in every room.

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Paper chains and plastic sandals aside, when my mother's two little sisters first arrive and settle into their housing commission flat, I come face to face with what I consider to be true cutting-edge Chinese chic. When they step off the plane, Aunt Ly and her little sister Sim are like those heroines in the movies set in pre-war Shanghai, that big booming city full of newly arrived dowdy women who came with boxy brown suitcases and countryside smiles smeared on their faces, ready to *make it*. They walk with dreams on their heels and the heels of their dreams: spangles, gold lamé and rhinestones, the height of glamour. They wear floating dresses they have made themselves – polyester is silk that requires less ironing, and the colours are infinite.

And when they move into their own flat, they show us that domestic glamour is not confined to the suburbs. The housing commission flats, with their distinctive checkered floors, are better than the apartments in those

Hong Kong serials my grandmother watches with my mother, complete with commercials copied direct from HK Television that you have to fast-forward. Those videocassettes are illegally shipped to Australia to stock the shelves of illegitimate video shops or even the lounge-room collections of extended families who pass them back and forth like shared secret pleasures. These serials have twenty-eight, twenty-nine videos and my mother and my grandmother discuss what has happened in them over the kitchen table while peeling carrots and chopping beans because my grandmother is a brilliant storyteller and conversationalist when she is not attacking people with bones in her words.

From the top of the Housing Commission flats you can see down below to the park and the playground equipment – they don't even have such private parks in Hong Kong! These flats have two or even three rooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen with black and white tiles – oh, such class, just like the black and white tiles in the rich people's mansions, except in plastic laminex. Easier to clean, you see.

In the cupboards of those flats are endless cups of coffee and sweetened condensed milk and multitudes of Marmee instant noodle packets. And when it is cold outside it is always warm inside. From the eleventh floor you can see down, and people are always walking in and out of their doorways, so many people so close. Laundry is always hanging outside, and plastic buckets, usually red ones for some bright reason, perhaps to counteract the distinct mossy-seepy smell of stairwells.

My aunts buy nail polish for twenty cents a bottle and sit on the floor of their bedrooms painting their toes. They curl their hair at the flats of their friends who are training to be hairdressers. Many old folk who became family friends take good care of them, tell them who are the good boys, and the old women watch with a cunning eye to see which young woman would be best suited for the son or cousin of so and so. "Ah Ly, I know a good young man for you." And they sing the praises of someone's son or someone's brother – never mentioned by name, they are always someone's son or someone's male relative, because they do not exist in isolation of their family. No one exists in isolation of their family, and if they do, there are plenty of old people to look after them and plenty of old people to look after, who live in the housing commission flats and whose sons and daughters leave them to mind the house and the babies while they both work to earn enough to raise their children born in the old country or the new.

These young women, proud and beautiful by virtue of being young, smile deliriously so that their cheeks glow and they can take their beautiful faces plein-air into the parks, except they choose to dab on fuchsia pink powder and mascara their lashes. They want to be the Taiwanese singer Teresa Tang, these young women in their Salvation Army stilettos and their fifty-cent lipsticks.

They find many friends, women like themselves at the height of glamour and prime of fertility, and in this country filled with hard-working young migrant men with determination in their eyes and the fire of the same dream burning in their bellies filled with factory working-class diet of two-minute noodles, there is no fear of not finding a family. So trusting, these young women from Southeast Asia, believing that because they are granted these new apartments and these new lives and the government takes such good care of them, that all Australians are alike.

So when my Auntie Ly's friend Ah Ngo needs to make a phone call because she has forgotten the number of Ly's flat, she thinks she can go to any flat door and knock; that all Australians are as kind as the Brotherhood of St Laurence ladies who have given her the dress she is now wearing, white with little brown and blue flowers scattered all over it, a flowing Monroe skirt below the knees and a little matching belt at the waist. So there she is, hair freshly layered and feathered around her face, lipstick on, high-heeled pumps, knocking on the door.

The door opens and she gesticulates hand to ear and smiles and says "Fon, fon?" because she knows that in these flats, the phone is close to the kitchen which is close to the door, and the burly white man in the singlet lets her in. Being Asian, she takes off her shoes at the door, and she goes to the phone and just as she fumbles in her purse for the little slip of paper which has Ly's phone number on it, just as she is about to make her call, head cocked to one side wedging the phone between her ear and her shoulder while she unfolds the little piece of paper, she feels a sharp jab on her behind and it is the Aussie bloke's hands and his front up against her back. The phone drops and she screams and bolts out of there so fast that he is left with a pair of white high-heeled pumps inside his flat, shoes which are too small for any Western woman's feet, and he does not know what to do with them. He picks them up, examines them, looks at the little heels and the plastic bows on the front. Then he peers out the window at the park below and flings them down one at a time, watching them fall to the concrete below. He closes the casement window and sits down to watch a bit of television.

Meanwhile, Aunt Ly's friend Ah Ngo runs up the flight of stairs because she does not know where to go and to go down would be to go down six more floors and she can't think clearly except to escape and up she goes and up seems like the only direction and in any case, the staircase in front of her goes up and so that is where she goes. She pants and sobs and heaves up the stairs and in the middle, just when she thinks her legs are going to give way, she hears a familiar voice: "Ay, ay, where are you going? I was just going down to look for you," and looks up to see my Auntie Ly and my Auntie Ly can see that something has happened. And so she takes her friend into her flat and she is shoeless but safe. And they both realise that it is not so safe here, and even though you are young and lovely you are not invincible.

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